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SUBJECT: GUIDANCE FOR ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS FIRST ANNUAL FORUM IN MADRID, JANUARY 15-16

REF: A. STATE 129134

- 1B. EMAIL REINEMEYER-HIGGINS
- 1C. 01/10/08

Classified By: Assistant Secretary Silverberg, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (U) The First Alliance of Civilizations (AOC) Annual Forum will be held in Madrid, January 15-16. According to organizers, this event will be action-driven and will provide participants with a unique international platform to develop joint initiatives and forge partnerships in the area of intercultural and interreligious engagement. In addition to high-level debates about emerging trends in relations between diverse cultures and religions, the Forum will feature announcements of initiatives and project-specific working sessions. The meeting is expected to identify next steps in program development as first described in the AOC Implementation Plan released in May 2007. The U.S. hopes that this meeting will provide information about the direction in which the AOC is heading, allowing the Department to assess USG involvement with the AOC.

12. (C) The U.S. will be represented by Embassy Madrid. Post may draw from the language in para 5 and the background in paras 8-10 during the conference. Department requests that Post notify the Department immediately in the event that this conference takes on a dominant anti-U.S. or anti-Israel tone.

All outcome documents should be cleared with Department before an offer of U.S. support is extended.

REPRESENTATION AND CONTACT

13. (SBU) The Ambassador has been designated as the U.S. representative and will attend the opening ceremony. Post may use its discretion to determine the level of Embassy representation, if any, at other specific Forum events/sessions. The Agenda for the Annual Forum can be found on the AOC website: <http://www.unaoc.org>.

14. (SBU) Post should follow the guidelines in reftel/email on contact with foreign officials at conferences.

OBJECTIVES

15. (U) While Madrid-based USG officials will attend the conference mostly in an observer capacity, there may be opportunities to raise issues of importance to the USG. Embassy officials attending these sessions should, as

appropriate, underscore the following points:

-- Note appreciation for the efforts of Spain and Turkey, the AOC's sponsors, to consider ways to improve understanding between moderate, civilizing forces within majority Islamic and Western societies. We agree that there is a need to strengthen cooperation against extremism, as we advance the President's agenda of supporting those who strive for freedom, democracy, and opportunity.

-- Note examples of our work in this field, including:

a) Introducing American Muslims to Muslim communities in other regions. For example the Citizen Dialogue program is a U.S. Department of State exchange program that brings American Muslims to Europe, to reach out and share their experiences and exchange views;

b) Empowering Muslim advocates of peace and coexistence, by connecting like-minded Muslims with others who are familiar with what civil society is doing about day-to-day issues, and how to build the link between the individual and the larger society;

-- Underscore need to ensure that the AOC is not misinterpreted as supporting the assumption that there is a conflict between Muslims and the West. Millions of Muslims are part of the West, consider themselves Western and will continue to be Western. Additionally, urge the AOC to reject the premise that all things Islamic come from the Middle East and North Africa region.

-- Emphasize that the U.S. does not want to see the conflict of the politicized High Level Group report reflected in the AOC's operations/programs. Note that the High Level Group report turned a blind eye to Islamic extremism and consistently suggested that Islamic-Western tensions are the fault of the West and Israel.

-- Highlight that the United States is a strong supporter of peace in the Middle East. However, the situation in the region is complex and multifaceted, with a number of issues contributing to a lack of peace. The United States encourages all parties involved to create an environment that will permit progress toward two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. As the President made clear during his recent trip to the region, we will continue to work closely toward that end with Prime Minister Olmert, President Abbas, moderate regional leaders, and our partners in the Quartet.

-- If raised: The United States vigorously opposes efforts to exclude Israel from membership or participation in the United Nations. We believe it is inappropriate to inject political issues into the work of the United Nations, numerous specialized and technical agencies.

-- Note that we hope that the AOC will become an energetic and creative organization within the UN system that we can fully embrace. However, the U.S. needs to know more about how the AOC will administer/oversee/manage programs before we can affiliate the USG with the AOC.

REPORTING DEADLINE AND POINT OF CONTACT

¶6. (U) Post should report by cable on atmospherics and specific outcomes by January 26. Please info USUN.

¶7. (C) While we do not expect this conference to devolve into an anti-Israel event, Post should immediately contact Anneliese Reinemeyer in IO/UNP (202 647-0046 or in the GAL) if the conference takes on a significantly anti-U.S. or anti-Israel tone (i.e., repeated comments denying Israel's right to exist, Holocaust denial, or overt anti-Semitic remarks).

BACKGROUND

¶18. (C) Spain and Turkey developed the Alliance of Civilizations initiative in the wake of the 2003 Madrid bombings, the rioting over the Dutch Mohamed cartoons, and in response to the perception of a growing divide between the West and Islam. The secretariat of the AOC sees the AOC as having the potential to educate the media and prevent media from being used as a tool to fuel similar misunderstandings in the future. (Note: in other venues, this type of media programming has been used by opponents of media freedom to disguise censorship and media intimidation in the language of religious tolerance. End note). The AOC hopes to become a clearing house for ideas and catalyst for partnerships between government agencies, international organizations and civil society bodies working in areas of intercultural and interreligious engagement. The AOC is a new and unique UN body, and the U.S. is still evaluating its effectiveness, efficiency, and compatibility of its objectives with ours.

¶19. (C) While we hope that the AOC will become an organization the U.S. can fully embrace, we have concerns that the AOC may be overtaken by anti-Israel/U.S. elements. This concern was heightened with the release of the High Level Group Report in December 2006. According to the report "politics, not religion, is at the heart of growing Muslim-West divide," and it says that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the central driver in global tensions. The U.S. fundamentally rejects the High Level Group report's premise. The report strongly criticizes U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its main conclusion blames Israel for things beyond its control, namely being a symbolic rallying point for extremists. Additionally, the U.S. objects to the politicization of the non-political UN bodies like the Alliance of Civilizations and to the proposal that foreign policy - specifically the resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - should be outsourced to groups like the Alliance of Civilizations. Finally, the U.S. does not agree that there is an inherent Muslim-West divide, noting that Muslims are a part of the West and that Muslim issues are not limited to the Middle East and North Africa. We hope that these biases are limited to the High Level Group and will not taint the AOC's work, but until we are sure, the U.S. has taken a wait and see attitude toward the AOC.

¶110. (C) In a letter to the Embassy of Spain on February 14, 2006, Secretary of State Rice noted that we expect to support an AOC initiative in areas such as:

- Furthering understanding between cultures;
- Promoting understanding of different cultures in schools;
- Developing links among universities, individual scholars, media, and civil society groups interested in promoting intercultural understanding;
- Enhancing the ability to reach out to youth and marginalized groups using the internet and other means; and
- Developing regional conferences and workshops to promote interactions between experts from diverse backgrounds and culture.

The letter also says that we look forward to "implementation of the work plan so that we can identify specific projects," which the U.S. could support. We fully intend to fulfill our commitment to the Spanish, but we would like to first learn more about the AOC's terms of reference and potential biases to allow us to meet the commitment in a way that minimizes the chance of our engagement subsequently becoming an embarrassment.

RICE